Gertrude Pringle Knows the Hard Road of Freelance Writing

IT'S a TOUGH LIFE, YOU CAN'T WEAKEN

Story and Picture
By GWEN CASH

SAND-HOGGING is a hard way to earn a living. So is mining, logging and medicine. But nothing beats journalistic free-lancing for toughness, which is why I raise my metaphorical hat to Mrs. Gertrude Pringle, columnist, feature writer, radio broadcaster and author of Canada's most authoritative book on manners, now spending her retired years at 1442 Rockland Avenue.

A free-lancer has no union, no newspaper guild, no association to raise and back her pay cheque. She (or he) is as the old song has it "out in the open with everyone passing"—and sniping. Her (or his) stuff has to be good or it won't be accepted. If she (or he) falls sick, that's just too bad and there's no pay cheque coming in. She (or he) has to buck a lot of competition from fluttering amateurs who want no pay at all but just to see their names in print, and there are thousands of public relations offices only too anxious to give away words for space.

Mrs. Pringle looks far from tough. Frail, dainty and in her late 70s, you'd sense at once she was educated in a fashionable ladies' school (Glen Mawr, Toronto, now defunct) and abroad (Switzerland and London).

One of the famous Thompson-Seton family, her uncle made millions as painter, author (mostly animal stories) and lecturer. His daughter, Mrs. Pringle's cousin, Anya Seton wrote "Katherine," a well-researched, spell-binding novel of a beautiful, lusty, medieval commoner whose love affair changed English history, and half a dozen other romances that have been filmed.

An uncle on her mother's side, William Romaine Callender invented the dialing system we use in telephoning today. Still another cousin Stuart-Thompson is an amateur naturalist and author of a recently-published book, "Outdoor Rambles," already in its second edition.

Grandfather Thompson brought ten sons to Canada to enrich its culture about the time the American Civil War ended. He had been a wealthy ship owner of South Shields and incidentally a descendant of the Earl of Wintoun, a fact which Mrs. Pringle refuses to talk about.

He came to Toronto with his enormous family when iron hulls replaced wooden bottoms, with a governess, household help and a lot of capital, and after having a go at farming, which wasn't his line of country at all, went into real estate which was.

Mrs. Pringle said she didn't like her grandfather Thompson much. "He tried to boss me."

For all her lady like charm, Mrs. Gertrude Pringle isn't one to be bossed.

A YOUNG WIDOW who, when her husband was alive had spent some months in Victoria, she returned to Toronto and was asked to start a column called **Madame Canada's Question Box** for the old Mail and Empire (later amalgamated with the Globe).

The column was supposed to be for women but much to everyone's surprise its greatest response came from men—often 200 letters a week.

"They asked everything from behaviour to scientific questions," said Mrs. Pringle. "I burnt out my eyes researching answers in the public library and had to give up the job."

Gertrude Pringle's book "ETIQUETTE IN CANADA" grew out of the Question Box.

At a Canadian authors' soiree she ran into Donald French, MA, then an editor for McClelland and Stewart's publishing house. He was interested in what she told him about her correspondence for the Question Box.

"No end of people all over Canada seem to want to know how to behave," she told him laughing.

Months later Mr. French said, "Write us a book about etiquette." And Mrs. Pringle did. It was no effort to her. She'd been brought up in a society that knew how to behave.

"ETIQUETTE IN CANADA" was first published in 1932. A second edition was brought out in 1949. It's still selling.

Then Mrs. Pringle tackled Maclean's Magazine. Vernon Mackenzie, now dean of journalism at the University of Washington, was then editor.

"Write us a piece about Agnes Macphail," he said.

Agnes had just been elected the first woman member at Ottawa and was a hard bird to catch. Gertrude Pringle managed to put enough salt on her tail to interview her for ten minutes before she was due to address a meeting.

"Miss Macphail kept edging towards the meeting and I kept edging after her," said Mrs. Pringle. "I didn't feel very satisfied about the interview but Vernon Mackenzie was and put me on staff."

Mrs. Pringle did a number of articles about craft work while she was with Maclean's. One of them, on weaving, caught the eye of Lady Allerdyce, wife of the Governor of Newfoundland, then a British colony, and resulted in a cottage industry being set up for fishermen's wives.

IN THE EARLY DAYS of radio Mrs. Pringle broadcast over two commercial stations for three years. "If you don't like what I say," she advertised, "I'll give you back your money."

In the entire three years only one advertiser asked for his money back.

Ten years ago Mrs. Pringle decided enough was enough and she'd retire to Victoria.

MRS. GERTRUDE PRINGLE

She was living in an apartment in what had been a millionaire's home at the corner of Spadina and Bloor Street, Toronto. It was Oct. 11, she remembers a Thanksgiving holiday weekend, with most people out of town.

At 2 a.m. fire broke out somewhere in the nether regions and shortly after Gertrude Pringle found herself on Bloor Street in her nightie and All her records, her stories, her books, the fine bare feet with her fur coat slung about her neck, furniture she'd inherited were gone.

"I had $800 insurance," she said. "I should have had $8,000 and even that wouldn't have replaced all I lost."

But Gertrude Pringle is not one to repine.

"It makes me dizzy," she said, "to think of all the things I've done, all the fun I've had and my big, big family. I've about a thousand cousins — all the nicest in the world."

So in a big, sunny upstairs room at 1442 Rockland Avenue sits Gertrude Pringle, author on etiquette, writer of articles galore, remembering the days when she was a successful, hard-working free lancer and chuckling over letters she gets from "the nicest cousins in the world."

HYBRID TAKES THE CAKE

HYBRID CORN, a giant grass with a distinguished pedigree, in little more than 35 years has become the most popular variety of the ancient plant.

When the first commercial hybrid corn seeds were put on the market in 1922, only 10 bushels were available. Since then, hybrid corn has spread across the world, increasing corn production wherever it goes.

The succulent corn-on-the cob in the grocery store, the large yellow ears that fatten fine beef cattle, and the puffed white popcorn sold at carnivals all are hybrids.

Hybrid corn is obtained by inbreeding selected strains to develop desirable qualities, then crossing the strains. Often two hybrids are interbred to create what is called—in the best sense of the phrase—a double cross.

Hybrid corn can produce on three acres as much as old varieties produced on four, and it is sturdy enough to be picked by machine. As most hybrids produce only one ear per stalk, machine-picking is simplified.

Two runty inbred strains that bring forth five-inch ears will grow handsome large ears when crossed. Hybrids can be adapted to growing seasons and can be made resistant to diseases.

North American Indians, who cultivated corn long before Europeans arrived, did not try to develop hybrids. Some tribes, notably the Hopi, attached an almost religious significance to keeping strains of corn pure.

Many later farmers accidentally or deliberately crossed corn, but it was not until the early 20th century that scientific crossing of corn began in earnest.

Even as plant scientists were developing better-yielding corn, however, popular "corn shows" put a premium on better-looking corn. A grand champion ear of corn might sell for $150. One farmer tried to dupe a corn show judge by inserting a metal rod in the centre of a cob to make it heavier.

The influence of the corn show is still felt today. Certain hybrid developers strive to develop good-looking ears at the expense of productivity, some experts say.

Hybrids soon spread through the United States corn belt, and after the Second World War, they were introduced on a large scale in Europe, Eastern Asia, and Africa.

In the Po Valley, Italy's corn belt, the crop is almost entirely hybrid. Production has increased 25 to 40 per cent. Russia has been planting American hybrids, but bad weather in new corn-growing areas has caused disappointing crops.

Many countries are developing their own varieties of hybrids to meet local growing conditions.

Helped by increased plants of hybrids, world corn production reached a record 7,100,000,000 bushels last year.